Wordplay from the angle of phonetics

Angelika Braun & Astrid Schmiedel
University of Trier

Wordplay and verbal irony are not as different as they might seem at first glance. In fact, they share the property of being *uneigentlich* ('non-actual'), i.e., the meaning is somehow dissociated from the wording. Thus the question arises whether non-actual speech is phonetically coded, and whether the cues thus created can be detected by naive listeners.

This presentation will demonstrate that this is very well the case for verbal irony. The question addressed is how disambiguation takes place on the phonetic level. In other words – how does a speaker signal the intended meaning and how are listeners able to get the underlying message? The study deals with single-word utterances in sincere and ironic settings. We studied a number of suprasegmental phonetic measures whose role as discourse markers is essentially undisputed. These include average voice fundamental frequency (F0) and parameters derived from it, intensity of the voice signal and duration.

The results of the acoustic measurements show a lower average F0, less F0 variability, a smaller F0 range, lower intensity and longer durations for the ironic stimuli. The perception study yielded overall recognition rates of more than 80 %, the sincere utterances being identified significantly better than the ironic ones.

The follow-up question arising from these findings is whether wordplay is also phonetically coded. For instance, one might expect the fundamental frequency to be higher and the articulation to be more precise (more peripheral formant values in acoustic phonetic terms; longer duration) in wordplay utterances, because the speaker may wish to signal that what s/he is saying is in some way out of the ordinary in order to make sure that the listener "gets the message". I am not aware of any phonetic work on this subject, and I will try to outline how the issue could be approached.